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Hervé Le Bras: The Nature of Demography

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The Nature of Demography by Hervé Le Bras, translated by Godfrey Rogers from the original French publication in 2005 (*La démographie*, Paris: Odille Jacob), is about change, as demonstrated by the title of the introduction: ‘the dynamics of change in demography’ (p. 1). On the one hand, measuring, modelling and understanding demographic changes at the individual and population level are regarded as central to the book. The author actually promotes demography to be seen as a science of processes. On the other hand, the book reflects on recent changes in the discipline of demography, by including recent topics in the field of fertility and mortality, by describing the history and core of contemporary demography and by addressing additional topics, such as migratory movements, nuptiality and the situation of the *homo demographicus* within networks.

Perhaps surprisingly, the title of the book itself does not reflect ‘change’. Actually, *The Nature of Demography* reflects—as the author expresses in the introduction—the search for ‘demography’s general form, its overall structure, [...] the coherence that is the fundamental reason for its existence’ (p. 3).

The author, thus, clearly did not want to constrain himself in terms of ideas and topics discussed, which is also evident from the many and broad aims of the book. The book does not just set out to provide a detailed examination of the fundamental population phenomena, but its foremost aim is to give a general introduction to demography. In addition, the book is designed to serve as a guide to recent research of relevance not only for professional demographers, but also for students and researchers in the social sciences, i.e. economists, sociologists, geographers, historians and biologists. In doing so, the book endeavours to combine theoretical preoccupations and practical intentions.

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In order to fulfil these aims, the book comprises three parts, that of individuals (part I), each possessing a life line, that of populations (part II), characterized by age distributions and growth processes, and that of space and networks (part III), providing the context of individual and population behaviour.

Part I consists of six chapters. It starts with the processes of dying and childbearing at the individual level, includes the methodological topic of censoring, and then turns to the aggregation of individual behaviours through either the longitudinal or the cross-sectional approach illustrated by the Lexis diagram, and ends with a discussion of the quantum versus tempo effects in fertility and mortality analysis. The essential theoretical underpinning in this first part of the book is the construction of the period form.

The five chapters of Part II elaborate upon the coherence between individual behaviour and population processes. Starting with a chapter on estimating future population sizes and age distributions—to illustrate this coherence—part II is largely about the theory of stable populations—seen as constituting the core of the book—and the associated importance of the replacement process. By demonstrating the inclusion of varying fertility and mortality over time, a link is made with the economic-demographic theories and models in the last two chapters of this second part, which among other things, deal with the interaction between economic growth and population growth as well as utility and retirement pensions systems.

The four chapters of Part III deal with the incorporation of marriage processes, internal migration processes, and the spatial distribution of populations. A crucial role is played by allocation models combined with the issue of attraction and competition. Although Chapter 15 on Densities seems to stand more or less on its own, in essence, in Part III, demography is linked to geography.

The book is without doubt surprising and interesting, especially with regard to its novel approach combining the important role of theory—approached in an almost philosophical way—with the inclusion of new, relevant, and partly interdisciplinary substantive fields of investigations.

The author's aim of both including new topics and providing a general introduction to demography has resulted in a very comprehensive book. Balancing the many different topics must have been challenging and is not without some imperfections. In my view, the elementary topics (mortality, fertility) in Part I are discussed rather briefly, giving for granted much knowledge, and with a more lengthy discussion of fertility than mortality. Parts II and III are discussed in much more detail, with an especially lengthy discussion of some of the migration topics covered. Although his discussion of some topics is elaborate, it unfortunately does not deal with all relevant subjects, such as the period adjusted TFR. This probably also relates to Le Bras' eagerness to provide his own views on the matters discussed. Important ideas and debates of interest to himself are frequently included, like his critical appraisal of the focus on period measures, his own model of tempo effects in mortality, and his own alternative framework on internal migration. The book is, thus, certainly not conventional. However, for the book to serve as a general introduction to demography and a guide to research in the social sciences, I believe a more balanced overview of different topics, with a more general description of the most elementary topics would have been beneficial.

The way Le Bras has integrated the many different topics is very skilful. Although the structure might at first sight be difficult to grasp, he emphasizes the interrelations between the various concepts, topics and chapters throughout. In doing so, he clearly demonstrates the interrelation of demographic issues. In Part I, for example, Le Bras' elaborate discussion of period and cohort approaches—which is often lacking in other textbooks—is very relevant to a full understanding of demography.

Another strength of the book is clearly the proper formalization of demographic issues. Not without reason, Michel Guillot refers to the book as a textbook in formal demography. The question, however, remains whether this emphasis on formalization, instead of a more empirical approach, is comprehensible for the broad audience that the book is intended for. In fact, substantial prior knowledge is required and illustrations are not always clear. Throughout the book, simulation is used to test theories, which is a strong merit of the book, but for some readers it might make already complicated matters perhaps even more complicated. Combined with his—at times—philosophical writing style, this book is certainly not easy to read for the broad audience Le Bras is targeting.

The Nature of Demography is a firm addition to the current handbooks in demography, serving as an advanced textbook for scientists to obtain the necessary fresh and critical mindset, which, in my view, could best be read after a more general introduction to demography. I am pretty sure it will change our way of looking at demography and its nature.

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